

BACK FENCE

Veterans
CONTINUING TO SERVE



THIS WEEK: Veterans &
Virginia, and Selflessness

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POSITIVE STEPS

Does Virginia Love Veterans? No, But Relationship Grows

My April column outlined the many volunteer programs that military veterans and military veterans' groups offer Virginia. Briefly, they included youth programs such as American Legion baseball, Boys and Girls State, Junior Law Cadet and Oratorical, along with VFW and Military Officers

Association scholarships that are offered *ad infinitum*. I also cited the billions of dollars that the 750,000 Virginia military veterans bring to the Commonwealth by their retirement pay and disability benefits, as well as the intangibles of their brain power and talent. All are helping Virginia's economy stay vibrant and robust and the envy of most of America. All of the above are proudly offered to Virginia by its veterans on a no-cost silver platter. (And all of the above are gleefully accepted by Virginia and its powers that be.)

I concluded by stating that military veterans by all their actions and mere presence do indeed love Virginia. And I closed my column by asking: Does Virginia, for the same reasons, always love its veterans?

I am truly sorry to say that the answer is *no*, but I'm happy to say that the relationship is getting better.

A Bad Beginning

In January, 1989, at a meeting that a small group of American Legionnaires and I had with a prominent member of the House of Delegates, I had my first inclination that something was not quite right with Virginia's military veterans and their General Assembly representatives. I was a neophyte to the Assembly and kept my mouth shut out of fear I would say something stupid. My Legion colleagues were seeking his support for a memorial resolution to Congress to enact legislation to prohibit physical desecration of the American flag. His reply was that veterans think they have some special right to ask him this by virtue of tough times and sacrifices we experienced in our military service. He said two of the easiest years he ever had in his life were spent at a stateside Army base doing nothing. His remarks went over like a lead balloon to my fellow Legionnaire and pal, a World War II veteran and survivor of the Battle of the Bulge, and to me, who spent 20-plus very uneasy months off the coasts of North and South Vietnam in small combatant ships.

I cite this incident not to say what great heroes my pal and I are, but to highlight an example of the arrogance and mean-spiritedness toward veterans that we perceived existed in the General Assembly in the late 1980s and 1990s — and maybe to some extent in the Executive Mansion.

This period of time saw the regimes of two Democratic and two Republican administrations, and roughly the same mix of General Assembly control — when veterans' programs were either slashed, weakened by stagnant funding during inflation, or killed outright. And all the while Virginia was shooting itself in the foot by denying federal outlays and alienating military veterans with its perceived cold-heartedness and neglect. (The most devastating losses to military veterans' programs were caused by the legislature's and the Gilmore administration's inability to produce budget amendments in 2001.)

Oh, there were some headline-grabbers during these years, such as the Amelia cemetery and the Veteran's Home in Roanoke, but these victories were the result of knock-down, drag-out battles with the General Assembly. It was only after lawmakers finally got through their skulls that the federal government would pick up most of the tab that they said,

"Gee whiz, these are probably good deals for Virginia."

Concerning budgetary battles, I want to make this point: Virginia's veterans are good citizens and good neighbors. We realize that in any state budget there is only so much money that can be spent on so many programs. We wholeheartedly support state money for education, public safety, the arts, the environment, and any other program benefitting Virginia and its citizens. But we try to point out that our agenda reaps tenfold in federal investment return and in the long run benefits all Virginians.

I want to make another point. I said earlier that the military veterans' perception of the "non-love" that Virginia had for them was improving. And here's why:

Recently there has been a real sense that the former negative attitude of the General Assembly has been replaced by a genuine spirit of appreciation for veterans and their service to their country. The post-9/11 war on terror, I'm sure, contributes to this new attitude.

But without any hesitation I know that this positive attitude on the part of veterans is largely attributable to the legislative efforts of Delegate Kirk Cox of Colonial Heights. Several years ago Cox originated the state tax break for low-pay-grade active-duty military, and has continued to push over the years for important and long-neglected veterans' issues and needs. For his efforts Cox was honored in 2005 with the highest award the American Legion can bestow — the Distinguished Service Medal. (Previous recipients of this award include John Warner, Colin Powell, and Phyllis Galanti.)

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Warner Helped, Too

Another who contributed to this change in attitude toward military veterans was Governor Mark Warner. In January, 2005, Warner looked me straight in the eye and said to me, as a small group of American Legionnaires looked on: *I want my administration to have as its legacy being remembered as one that truly supported military veterans.*

Warner's administration will indeed be so remembered. But only because Delegate Cox, a Republican, and Governor Warner, a Democrat — strange bedfellows indeed — took the high road and independently, but in harmony, initiated legislation that will greatly benefit Virginia's military veterans now and for years to come, and in turn will eventually benefit all Virginians.

Yes, Virginia's "love" for its veterans was a long time in coming. But it was worth the wait.

And the General Assembly should remember Kipling's admonition: "Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool. You can bet that Tommy sees."

■ *A retired captain in the U.S. Navy and a Vietnam veteran, Connie O'Neill served as the Virginia State Adjutant of the American Legion from 1988 to 2001. O'Neill chaired the Board of Veterans Affairs in the Allen administration and was appointed to the Joint Leadership Council, comprising 22 veterans organizations and 200,000 veterans, by Governor Mark Warner; in 2004 the group elected him its chairman. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

'NOBLE AND STAINLESS'

Selfless Service and Courage Define the American Warrior

In his "Farewell to the Corps" address given at the Military Academy at West Point on May 12, 1962, Gen. Douglas MacArthur rhetorically asked the soon-to-be-new lieutenants: "[W]hat sort of soldiers are those you are to lead? Are they reliable? Are they brave? Are they capable of victory?"

The general's answer was unequivocal and timeless: "Their story is known to all of you. It is the story of the American man at arms. My estimate of him was formed on the battlefields many, many years ago, and has never changed. I regarded him then, as I regard him now, as one of the world's noblest figures; not only as one of the finest military characters, but also as one of the most stainless."

MacArthur's estimate of servicemembers may not be the first description that comes to mind when considering a young soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or Coast Guardsman. It is not unusual to think of servicemen and -women as hard-chargers, often rowdy and full of bravado. After all, they are usually young and almost always away from home for the first time. Peel away the bravado, however, and at his core, the American fighting man is a selfless guardian of all that is most good and decent about a democratic people.

Service Above Self

Today, our servicemembers are spread around the globe in the fight against those who wish America ill. For the most part, they are not in any of the multitude of other places that our national defense needs "boots on the ground" because they carefully weighed all the options and decided that the future of the country requires them to be there. Rather, at some point each of these patriots decided the time for action was at hand, and that there would be time later to debate policy, consider alternatives, and discuss courses of action. Some made the decision quietly and others more profanely and outwardly, but each reached a similar conclusion: Right and justice should be defended; freedom and liberty are worthy of sacrifice. Whether when initially joining the "Brotherhood of Arms" or at some other juncture



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

U.S. Army in the Salah Ad Din province of Iraq.

along life's path, every servicemember has had this epiphany-like call to serve. At some point, every veteran has worn the uniform of this nation because of a desire to serve a cause greater than one's self.

That is not to say that those who never served in the military cannot appreciate or experience a similar sense of duty and sacrifice. Nor is it meant to suggest that those whose youth found them pursuing other endeavors when their peers volunteered to go in harm's way are unable to love their country just as deeply. Life is full of opportunities to put aside personal gain to serve our fellow man. Military service, however, uniquely requires large doses of selfless sacrifice, personal courage, and unbending loyalty to a cause greater than one's self.

Pursuit of Right & Justice

But the servicemembers of a free country should be neither pitied nor scorned by the civilians they serve. As already stated, the warrior chooses his own path, he makes his own way. Veterans of all services learn early to avoid the path of comfort and seek out the way of truth and challenge. They spend their lives, both on active duty and in post-active service, in search and service of the greater good. Our servicemen and -women are marked from the beginning as people of action, not merely people of words. They seek to lead not for the sake of power or personal accomplishment, but for right and justice for all people. That is why they are held to a higher standard, and why veterans feel personally let down when a fellow servicemember falls short of the mark.

Personal Courage

Three years ago in the run-up to the current war in Iraq, the American people were promised a campaign of "shock and awe." It was expected that our firepower and technological superiority would be overwhelming, and it was significant. But those focusing on the explosions and showers of sparks turning the Iraqi night to day missed the most awesome aspect of any armed struggle: The true remarkable-ness of battle is found at the individual level.

Those who have personally been with soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen know that the shock and awe is found in the episodes when individuals — both the leaders and the led — ignore their own safety and well-being and put the mission and their fellow servicemembers' well-being first. In the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the almost routine examples of personal courage under fire are amazing. It is moving beyond words to hear story after story of individuals leaving covered and concealed positions to confront — at close range — the enemy. Their bravery under fire, their steadfast devotion to duty, and their unyielding commitment to the warrior's creed of "Follow Me" is truly shocking and awesome.

We recently observed Memorial Day with the countless rows of small American flags spaced exactly one boot length from plain, weathered headstones. As Gen. MacArthur said in his farewell address, we do this to remember those who have given all that mortality has to give. We should also take that time to acknowledge that our veterans' example of patriotism is like no other. It is, indeed, noble and stainless.

■ *A graduate of West Point, John Montgomery retired from the Army after having served as an Airborne Ranger and Inspector General of the Louisiana National Guard. A Sandston resident and lawyer, he advised former Governor Mark Warner on military issues. His Commentary Columns on veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

HELP FROM ALL

How Will Military Solve the Recruiting Dilemmas It Faces?

NORFOLK. Is anyone listening? Supposedly, there is a "war" going on. Do most Americans really — truly — care? Are we willing to commit to and to support this war effort? Are we willing to enlist and/or allow our children to enlist for the cause? What about the rich and famous among us?

Recently the media reported that the Army and Marine Corps were having difficulties getting enough recruits to fill their ranks. The Army failed to reach its recruiting goals by 15 percent or so during the recent fiscal year (a shortfall of 6,600 of an overall recruiting goal of 80,000), and the Marines barely attained their overall recruiting goals for the same period.

Uncle Sam is now asking parents and others to help recruiters enlist enough personnel into military service, particularly into the Army and Marine Corps. As a combat veteran, a 30-year retired Marine sergeant major, and the father of a petty officer first class with nine years' active-duty service, I believe this recruiting dilemma is more complicated than meets the eye.

It intrigues me that the military — particularly the Army and Marine Corps — is experiencing recruiting shortages in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Since many of us want to spread freedom and democracy all over the globe, now we have an excellent opportunity to put our beliefs and philosophies into actions and deeds.

I began thinking about a few things in regard to the public helping the Army (and Marine Corps and

other services) with recruiting efforts. Wouldn't it be nice if our leaders — political, military, civic, business, and others — encouraged their sons, daughters, relatives, and friends to volunteer for the cause? When it comes to these matters, nothing speaks as loudly as personal sacrifice and involvement. It would speak volumes when it comes to commitment and sacrifice on behalf of the elite and leadership class.

Few 'Elites' Serve Country

With very few exceptions — and I mean *very* few exceptions — the rich, famous, and powerful among

us do not volunteer to serve their country and fight for freedom and democracy throughout the world. While many have accused the Bush administration of harboring "chicken hawks," the Supreme Court and Congress are not filled with many military veterans, either. For example, 70 percent of members of Congress were veterans in 1969. Only 25 percent were veterans in the Congress of 2004.

If joining the military is good enough for the average American, it should be just as good and honorable for everyone else. This action would go far in setting the example, especially for those who believe so deeply and strongly in our military and in this just

cause. What a great way to show that you are willing to do your share.

As the saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words." After all, Uncle Sam needs you. And, what better way to show your support for the military and for Uncle Sam in this time of great need, sacrifice, and commitment?

Recently the military has lowered some of its personnel standards, raised the enlistment age, retained subpar personnel, and offered higher monetary incentives to address this recruiting shortfall. Even talk of reinstating the national draft has been suggested by some prominent members of Congress and influential others.

Several significant barriers hinder a call to arms among the general (and diverse) populace:

First, many Americans believe this is an unnecessary war. Second, while most Americans (parents and influential others) support the troops over there, they are not willing to go and/or send their sons and daughters over there. Third, there is an underlying feeling that this war (like Vietnam) is not being fought in an all-out effort to be won in a timely and/or efficient manner. Fourth, there is a "blood for oil" stigma attached to this war effort. And there are too many industrialists and profiteers involved in this valiant effort.

Issue Needs Resolution

Until these kinds of issues and realities are discussed and resolved, there will not be enough support to eradicate the military's recruiting dilemma.

I hope somehow, some way, we gather the leadership and insight to deal with these issues. Otherwise, this is just the beginning of a bigger problem that may cause us to make future choices and decisions that are not in our best interests.

And that would be devastating for us as a people and a nation.

■ *A Norfolk resident, John Horton is a retired Marine sergeant major and a recently retired juvenile probation officer. He is currently working as a volunteer with inner-city youths, parents, families, and organizations.*

As the initial rise in military volunteers responding to the attacks of 9/11 has diminished, it has become more difficult for Army and Marine recruiters to make goals.



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